

(Unclassified Paper)

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

Newport, Rhode Island

OP ART TO THE RESCUE:

FUNDAMENTALS FOR A HOSTAGE CRISIS

By

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy

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18 May 1998

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Chairman, Joint Military Operations Department

Angus Ross 15 MAY '98

CDR Angus Ross, Royal Navy Date
Faculty Advisor

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1. Report Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
2. Security Classification Authority:			
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:			
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.			
5. Name of Performing Organization: JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
6. Office Symbol: C		7. Address: NAVAL WAR COLLEGE 686 CUSHING ROAD NEWPORT, RI 02841-1207	
8. Title (Include Security Classification): OP ART TO THE RESCUE (U)			
9. Personal Authors: Ed Flora, LTCOL, ANG			
10. Type of Report: FINAL		11. Date of Report: 18 May 98	
12. Page Count: 28			
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.			
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: Highlight the importance of operational art to hostage rescue operations.			
15. Abstract: The objective of this paper is to underscore the importance of operational art in the planning and execution of a hostage rescue operation. With this form of asymmetrical threat, strategic and operational leaders are faced with a difficult challenge where political objectives are wholly dependent on a focused tactical action. The critical influence of the action and interaction of operational factors, in a highly charged political context, is vividly illustrated by comparing the 1980 U.S. operation in Iran with the 1976 Israeli operation in Entebbe. This comparison contrasts and highlights four areas: first, the political context and ensuing strategic guidance, second, factor space including hostage location, distance and weather; third, factor time and the impact on planning, intelligence, and training; and finally factor forces, where the effects and interdependence of readiness, operational security, command and control and force protection were decisive in the varied outcomes of the two operations.			
16. Distribution / Availability of Abstract:	Unclassified X	Same As Rpt	DTIC Users
17. Abstract Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
18. Name of Responsible Individual: CHAIRMAN, JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
19. Telephone: 841-6461		20. Office Symbol: C	

Security Classification of This Page Unclassified

DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 1

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The objective of this paper is to underscore the importance of operational art in the planning and execution of a hostage rescue operation. With this form of asymmetrical threat, strategic and operational leaders are faced with a difficult challenge where political objectives are wholly dependent on a focused tactical action. The critical influence of the action and interaction of operational factors, in a highly charged political context, is vividly illustrated by comparing the 1980 U.S. operation in Iran with the 1976 Israeli operation in Entebbe.

This comparison focuses on four areas for examination and contrast: 1) the political context and ensuing strategic guidance; 2) the constraints of factor space including hostage location, distance and weather; 3) the impact of factor time on planning, intelligence, and training; and 4) factor forces, where the effects and interdependence of readiness, operational security, command and control and force protection were decisive in the varied outcomes of the two operations.

This paper concludes that Israeli adherence to the fundamentals of operational art was critical to their success while the misapplication of these principles led to the U.S. failure. Given the currency and pervasiveness of asymmetric threats, it is important that operational leaders combine the improved capabilities of U.S. Special Forces with a sound commitment to operational art.

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Introduction

“The first week in November marked the beginning of the most difficult period of my life. The safety and well-being of the American hostages became a constant concern for me, no matter what other duties I was performing as President. I would walk in the White House Gardens early in the morning and lie awake at night, trying to think of additional steps I could take to gain their freedom without sacrificing the honor and security of our nation. I listened to every proposal, no matter how preposterous, all the way from delivering the Shah for trial as the revolutionaries demanded to dropping an atomic bomb on Tehran... On November 6, two days after the American Embassy was taken, we commenced plans for a possible rescue operation.”¹

These words from Jimmy Carter underscore the dramatic impact of a hostage situation and vividly describe how power can be leveraged by an asymmetric threat. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin experienced a similar quandary when the family members of the hostages held at Entebbe, Uganda stormed the government compound, demanding that Israel comply with the terrorist’s demands.² Seasoned by previous experience with hostage situations, Rabin knew the emboldening impact of surrender as well as the political costs of refusing.

It is in this highly charged environment that political leaders turn to the military to provide an alternative solution to the dilemma. A rescue operation holds the opportunity of achieving both objectives- freedom of the hostages and preservation of national and international prestige and security. Schlomo Gazit, Director of Israeli Military Intelligence who helped plan the Entebbe raid, described a high profile rescue operation as the “ climax of a war which must be resolved in a single military act.”³ In essence the military must provide an operational bridge where a focused tactical operation of inherent high risk, is conducted to achieve a specific strategic aim. This poses a unique and difficult challenge to the operational commander.

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate the crucial importance of operational fundamentals in meeting the challenges of planning and executing a high profile rescue operation. The method of analysis will be to contrast the 1980 U.S. hostage rescue operation in Iran with the 1976 Israeli operation at Entebbe from an operational perspective, focusing on the political context, operational factors, and their associative influence on other op art elements. This comparison will show that the U.S. failure stemmed from violating the fundamentals of operational art while adherence to those principles yielded success for Israel.

The pervasive existence of state and nonstate actors who may resort to asymmetric means to counter U.S. strength make consideration of this issue a current need. Our National Military Strategy states that we "must increase our capabilities to counter these threats and adapt our military doctrine, training, and equipment to ensure a rapid and effective joint and interagency response."⁴ Equally important to these efforts is a sound commitment to the timeless fundamentals of operational art.

Operation Eagle Claw⁵

On 4 November 1979, a group of militant Iranian students took control of the United States embassy in Tehran taking 53 Americans hostages and demanding the return of the Shah for trial. Two days after the takeover, President Carter directed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to start working on a rescue plan and on 12 November General David Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, chose Major General James Vaught as the Task Force Commander. The JCS, responding to the acute fear of Carter and Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor, that a leak might jeopardize negotiations or the rescue mission, decided not to implement the

standing crisis Contingency Plan (CONPLAN). Instead they tasked Vaught to build his organization from varied sources to assure secrecy. Key players on this ad hoc team were Lieutenant General Philip Gast USAF , who was considered an Iran expert, Colonel Charlie Beckwith, head of Delta Force, Colonel James Kyle, a USAF pilot in Special Operations, and Colonel Charles Pitman, USMC, a helicopter expert who was on a tour of duty at the JCS.

The plan called for eight RH-53 helos to take off from the aircraft carrier Nimitz in the Arabian Sea and fly 600 miles under the cover of darkness at low altitude. They were to rendezvous with six C-130's transporting Beckwith's Delta Force commandos at a remote site in Iran called "Desert One". At this site, the helicopters were to be refueled from bladders carried in the C-130's. The assault force was to be loaded into the helo's which would then continue, under the cover of darkness, to "Desert Two", a site in the mountains above Tehran. The C-130's were to depart once the helicopter force was airborne. At Desert Two, the assault team was to remain concealed during daylight and after dark rendezvous with two agents that had been previously inserted into Tehran. These agents were to have six Mercedes trucks in a warehouse on the outskirts of the city. Beckwith and one of the agents planned to reconnoiter the most favorable route to the hostage locations and then return to the hide site and commence movement of the force to the objective. The assault force was divided into three elements; one to take the embassy, another the Foreign Affairs Ministry where three of the hostages were held, and the other to secure the soccer stadium near the embassy as a backup landing zone. The helicopters and two AC-130 gunships, (to provide covering fire if required) were to be coordinated by Delta's air liaison officer. Once the objectives were secured, the choppers would pick up hostages and troops and proceed to a nearby airfield that had been

secured by Rangers concurrent with the operation in Tehran. There they would board C-141 transports and proceed out of country.

In the months preceding the rescue, intelligence gathering and training was conducted in preparation for execution. The JTF commander directed most activity personally from Washington and individual parts of the operation trained separately. Though the NCA did not establish a timeline or expected D-day, planners labored under the pressure that execution of the emerging rescue plan was imminent. Serious consideration for actually launching the rescue did not occur till early April 1980, when Carter's frustration with the breakdown in negotiations peaked. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was adamantly opposed to any military intervention, but after briefings from Vaught and Beckwith, Carter authorized the mission with a target date of 24 April.

The launch of the helicopters from the carriers and the C-130's with the assault force from Egypt went as planned, but within two hours, helo #6 made a precautionary landing due to a caution light. Helo # 8 landed also and picked up the men and equipment from #6 and proceeded towards Desert One. An hour later the flight of helicopters encountered an unexpected dust storm (called a *haboob*) that reduced visibility and made formation flight difficult. Worsening conditions eventually forced the flight to separate and continue individually towards the destination under extremely difficult and tiring conditions. In the dust storm, helicopter #5, with Pitman aboard suffered mechanical problems with its flight instruments and elected to return to the carrier. Helicopter #2 experienced a secondary hydraulic pump failure but continued on to Desert One.

The C-130's arrived at the rendezvous point on time, unloaded the ground forces and secured the area. While unloading the fuel bladders and equipment, a busload of Iranian

civilians approached the site on an intersecting road and had to be stopped with small arms fire. The solution for this unexpected occurrence was to fly them out in one of the C-130's and then return them to Iran after the operation. Additionally, a fuel truck came up behind the bus and after refusing to stop, was fired upon and burst into flames as the occupants fled on foot.

80 minutes after the scheduled rendezvous time, the last of the six remaining helicopters arrived at Desert One. The conditions at the rendezvous site, where swirling dust, noise, and darkness made communication and recognition difficult, were unfavorable to responding to the rapidly changing situation. The plan called for a minimum of six helicopters, and with Pitman's absence, there was a time of confusion and consternation as Kyle and Beckwith sought an answer on the status of the helo with a failed backup hydraulic system. The helicopter flight lead determined the aircraft to be non-flyable and after communication with the President through the CJTF in Egypt, the decision was made to abort.

As helicopter #3 attempted to respot for refueling, it collided with one of the C-130's. In the ensuing explosion, eight crewmembers were killed and several seriously wounded. The decision was made at the scene to evacuate the site as quickly as possible. All the helicopters, significant classified equipment and documents, and the bodies of those killed in the collision were left in the Iranian desert. The rest of the force evacuated in the C-130's back to Masirah, Oman.

Operation Thunderball ⁶

On Sunday, 27 June 1976, Air France Flight 139 was hijacked after departing from Athens in route to Paris. The plane refueled in Libya, where one passenger feigning sickness, was released. The terrorists, representing the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), directed the French aircrew to land at Entebbe, Uganda, where they were joined by additional PFLP members in holding the hostages at the Old Terminal building. Idi Amin, president of Uganda and self appointed Field Marshall, aided and abetted the terrorists, strengthening airport security with Ugandan troops while claiming a neutral position as an intermediary. On Tuesday, the terrorists demanded release of a large number of prisoners held in Israel and several other European countries, with an original deadline of Thursday. On Wednesday, the terrorists released all but the Jewish hostages and the Air France crew and extended the deadline till Sunday.

Yizhak Rabin convened a crisis management team within hours of being notified of the hijacking. After it became apparent that Entebbe was the final destination for the hostages, planning for a military solution began in earnest. Two courses of action were open to the political leadership. Track A was to negotiate with the terrorists and seek to gain freedom for the hostages while minimizing the damaging effects to the nation. In the first days, Rabin favored Track A in light of the distance to Uganda, pressure from the hostage's families, and the deadlines for meeting the terrorist's demands. He also sought to buy time so that planning for Track B could be conducted. Track B, favored by Defense Minister Shimon Peres, was to pursue a military course of action to free the hostages. While negotiations were conducted with the PFLP through Paris and indirectly through phone conversations with Idi Amin,

aggressive intelligence efforts provided military planners with information to confidently develop a rescue plan. In addition to unanimous approval by the cabinet, Rabin's final support depended on Chief of Staff General Mota Gur's satisfactory observation of a full-scale rehearsal, conducted the previous night. Given the constraints of time, all necessary preparations had been undertaken concurrent with these events and Operation Thunderball was already airborne, subject to recall, when go ahead was given.

Major General Dan Shomron was the operational commander for the ground forces with Colonel Yonni (Jonathan) Netaniahu in charge of the assault force, composed mostly of General Staff Reconnaissance (GSR) commandos. Once the General Staff and Peres approved the basic rescue concept, Shomron was put in charge of all planning. The final plan called for the assault force to deploy from a staging base in Israel in four C-130 aircraft, initially utilizing standard air traffic routes and procedures out of Israel down through the Red Sea. The rest of the flight would be at low altitude through Ethiopia and across Lake Victoria to the approach to Entebbe. The first C-130 was planned to make a "quiet" landing at midnight Uganda time on the 4th of July.

Two Israeli Air Force (IAF) 707's, disguised in El Al (Israel's state airline) markings were to precede the assault force and provide support. One was an airborne command and control platform, complete with a sophisticated communications suite. Two members of the General Staff, Benny Peled, Chief of the IAF and Yekutiel Adam, Chief of the Operations Branch would be in the air over Entebbe providing command guidance as required. The other 707 was a completely outfitted hospital that was to land at Nairobi and await the arrival of the hostages and the wounded. An additional C-130 Pathfinder was available for ECM/ELINT support and backup for the assault aircraft.

The ground force was divided into several teams with separate tasks. The first C-130, after taxiing to the end of the runway closest to the Old Terminal, would unload Netaniahu and the GSR team to secure the hostages. Disguised with black make up, the hostage team would approach the old terminal building in a black Mercedes followed by two Land Rovers. This simulation of an official party was a ruse to allow the team to approach the Ugandan guards without confrontation and take them out with silenced weapons. The team would then storm the terminal building, eliminating the terrorists and shouting Hebrew words to the hostages to keep them out of the line of fire. Once the area was secure, evacuation of the hostages to the C-130 would commence.

The other teams were assigned responsibility for guarding approaches to the airport, securing the control tower, and sabotaging the Ugandan Migs based at the airport. An additional team was tasked to dismantle Soviet radar and electronic equipment for exploitation. The C-130's would refuel at Nairobi if the situation on the ground precluded refueling from airport supplies.

Actual events mirrored the plan closely. Using ECM to deceive the Entebbe tower operators, the first C-130 landed and unloaded the assault team without reprisal. The Mercedes deception allowed Netaniahu's team to approach close to the hostage location, and although they were forced to kill the Ugandan guards and receive return fire, the surprise, speed and shock of the assault was effective. All of the terrorists were killed or captured and the hostages secured within three minutes of the assault vehicles rolling out of the C-130. It took 53 minutes to get the hostages airborne; the rehearsal had taken 55 minutes. Unfortunately the overwhelming success of the rescue was dimmed by the loss of three

hostages and the leader of the GSR, Lt Col Netaniahu, who was killed by a Ugandan sniper. In his honor, the operation was renamed Operation Jonathan.

Political Context and Strategic Guidance

The influence of political considerations is accentuated when the word “hostage” is introduced into the equation. The weight that the political leadership puts on the safety of the hostages shapes the strategic guidance and may impose constraints that affect the operational plan. President Carter’s singular focus on the safety of the hostages, described in the introduction, affected his view of how the military would fit into the situation and was seen by some to strengthen the Iranian perception of the value of the hostages⁷. Carter eschewed any inclination toward a military option, whether a rescue or retaliation, for fear of consequences to the hostages.⁸ His approval of development for a rescue plan came with the constraints that the lives of the hostages were paramount, that absolute secrecy be maintained, that few individuals would know of the plan,⁹ and that bloodshed should be avoided whenever possible.¹⁰ This guidance, while sound in principle, was out of balance in practice for the requirements of this operation.

The fact that the NCA held the military option as a last resort showed a flawed understanding of the reciprocal interaction between strategic efforts and operational objectives. The impetus for focusing attention on the rescue operation at the strategic level was more out of frustration than as a coherently planned and integrated backup for failing negotiations. The near total focus on secrecy, while a valid concern, had an adverse effect at the operational and tactical level as did the absence of strategic and operational deception,

normally a complement to clandestine operations. Instead of integrating negotiations and deceptive military postures or actions with the rescue plan, the political leadership turned to the rescue operation after taking a series of hard line measures to increase the pressure on Iran.¹¹ Eagle Claw was put in motion under pressure to “do something”¹² to “lance the boil of American frustration”.¹³ The JCS investigation which followed, commonly known as the “Holloway Report” determined that portions of the plan were so complex and high risk, that any estimate of overall probability of success was essentially a matter of conjecture.¹⁴ Assessing the fundamental questions of adequacy, feasibility, and risk based predominantly on political expediency and frustration is a flawed approach.

The situation in Israel during the Entebbe crisis was markedly different. Prime Minister Rabin and Defense Minister Peres as well as most of the Israeli civilian leadership had served in combat against the very kind of adversary they were facing in Uganda. They had an experienced understanding of the risks and rewards of a military rescue operation and a balanced view of the strategic priorities involved. The hostages on Flight 139 were regarded as “soldiers on the front line” and their fate was judged in relation to the strategic costs of capitulation for Israel’s future.¹⁵

Rabin realistically pursued negotiations to free the hostages based on the deadlines and threats issued by the terrorists, but it was not done in a vacuum from the military option. He held that Israel “must continue to function on two planes: negotiation with the terrorists as if we have no military option, and preparation of the military option as if there is no negotiation”.¹⁶ When the military options were deemed unfeasible for the first deadline, the negotiating track was continued and adjusted to buy time for the military planners. In Israel,

negotiations were seen as an integrated and supportive option pursuant to assessing a rescue plan that was feasible and acceptable.

It was in these differing political and strategic environments that the factors of space, time, and forces acted and interacted on the planning and execution of the two rescue operations. Each factor had a direct effect and in combination a compounding influence on the outcome of each mission.

Factor Space

The location of hostages has a significant bearing on the feasibility and complexity of a rescue operation. The local terrain, geostrategic position and the distance to the objective are elements that influence the plan. In Tehran, the hostages were held in the middle of the city, and to complicate the situation, in different locations. This required a clandestine approach in rented trucks to two separate "rescues" which had to be synchronized in time to preclude foiling the other. The need to extract the force quickly once the operation was uncovered drove the requirement for a helicopter extraction that depended on timing and success of prior events. Charlie Beckwith, ground commander for the assault force, was confident that his teams could do the job, but recognized the location of the hostages raised the complexity of the operation and increased the number of critically linked events.¹⁷

The hostages at Entebbe were held at the airport in one location and by comparison presented planners with a less difficult assault and extraction plan. An important point here is that the Chief of Staff, General Gur, insisted on simplicity and rejected several proposed plans as too complex. The most difficult problem was to achieve surprise at the Old Terminal

building where the hostages were held. The plan called for a minimum number of synchronized events and held close to the principle of simplicity.

The country where the hostages are held is a constraint on factor space. The lack of staging bases and the political sensitivities of surrounding countries narrows the options and compounds the distance problem. In Iran, most of the adjacent countries were ruled out for political or operational security (OPSEC) reasons, leaving only a base in Egypt and the carrier Nimitz, already on station in the Indian Ocean, to launch from. Only in the final stages was it decided to operate from Oman, without their knowledge of the objective. Colonel Kyle, who commanded the C-130 force, felt these "real estate restrictions" made the insertion and extraction of the force more difficult than it already was.¹⁸ Israel, soon after the hijacked plane had landed in Uganda, started working with trusted contacts in Kenya, and gained assurance that Israeli planes under the El Al charter would not be turned away. The Israelis promptly painted the 707's and the C-130's with civilian markings. This diplomatic coordination coupled with deception helped planners solve one of the difficulties of distance.

The normal logistical issues of moving forces near enough to the objective to accomplish their mission are compounded by the requirements for secrecy and surprise. In Iran, the challenge was to find a way to get rescue forces in the area without alerting the Iranians. Besides being on the other side of the world, the hostages in Tehran were over 600 miles inland from the Persian Gulf and this fact alone posed one of the most difficult challenges to planners.¹⁹ Kyle described his frustration; *"Those distances- the Chairman really hung one on us"*²⁰

The U.S. did not have helos that could cover the distance from the Arabian Sea without refueling and this force limitation required that the helicopters be refueled at a

midpoint and also drove the requirement for a two-night operation. The duration of darkness, which was required for secrecy and force protection, did not allow the operation to be completed in one night.

In late November, an oilman from Oklahoma approached the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) with a plan to convert large oil tankers to carry helos and disguise them for operations in the Persian Gulf.²¹ He had deduced that helicopters would be the logical choice and that range would be a problem. The plan could have resolved some of the distance problems and also provided the necessary deception but was never pursued due to a perceived lack of time before the hostages would likely be released.²² In the end, the combination of space, force and time drove planners to develop a scheme that included four geographic locations in hostile territory, and relied on numerous mutually dependent synchronized actions and multiple phases. General Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, after describing the plan to Carter noted that it was exceptionally complex and making each of the parts fit together on time gave him the greatest concern.²³

The Israeli rescue plan was based on the knowledge that the C-130 could traverse the 2400 miles to Entebbe unrefueled. This combination of movement and maneuver kept the plan simple and minimized sequence and synchronization enroute. The circuitous routing through the Red Sea at low altitude solved the problems of detection and overflight sensitivities.

A final consideration of factor space was the impact of the dust storm that contributed decisively to the unraveling of the Iranian rescue plan. The dust storms were a known phenomenon and their existence and potential had been known to JTF planners and included in the OPLAN weather annex.²⁴ The problem was that this information had not been

disseminated to the helicopter or C-130 crews in the interests of OPSEC. The result was that the helicopter pilots could not maintain visual formation, experienced undue confusion, and were subjected to added stress and fatigue.²⁵ It caused one helo to abort back to Nimitz and may well have contributed to the collision at Desert One.

Factor Time

In a hostage situation, time is often the decisive factor that determines feasibility, force deployment and employment options, and the level of risk.²⁶ It is an irretrievable asset that acutely affects the critically related functions of planning and intelligence. In both of our cases, the strategic and operational management of time was a crucial determinant of outcomes.

The time factor was most critical in the Entebbe crisis and both the leadership and planners understood its importance. One of the legendary aspects of the operation is that it was planned, approved by a unanimous cabinet vote, and executed all within five days of the hostages arriving in Uganda. Within hours of receiving notice of the hijacking, the Israeli leaders formed a special crisis-action team to coordinate a response. As soon as the plane landed at Entebbe, separate teams of military planners went to work around the clock to develop viable options.

An initial proposal similar to the final plan was presented to Gur and Peres in time to meet the Thursday deadline but was not approved because of gaps in intelligence and excessive risks. When the deadline was extended to Sunday, Shomron, Peled, and Netaniahu capitalized on the extra time to fill the intelligence holes and refine the plan and consider

contingencies. Every detail from start to finish was scrutinized down to the photographing and fingerprinting of dead terrorists to preclude exaggerated claims by the PFLP after the fact. Each team member was tasked to "sweep" the scene prior to egress to secure any lost documents or dropped Israeli equipment.²⁷

The Israeli success in developing a viable plan under the pressures of a deadline and the difficulties of distance can be attributed to several basic points. First, Israel possessed a trained and experienced force with its own headquarters directly subordinated to the General Staff and laterally integrated with the Israeli intelligence community.²⁸ The GSR utilized existing contingency plans and proven operational methods and the C-130 crews were all experienced in insertion and extraction tactics. Second, there was no need for time consuming ad hoc groups of specialists to be brought together or special administrative structures developed. Third, there were no chokepoints to slow the flow of intelligence.

Timely intel derived from a broad range of sources contributed immensely to the planning and eventual success. All non-Israeli hostages that had been released were questioned for details, some under hypnosis.²⁹ Airfield and building layouts, air traffic schedules into Entebbe and the routine of Ugandan troops and terrorists were gleaned from innocuous and undercover sources. Operatives in Kenya and Uganda provided details about air defenses, and much information on the intentions of the terrorists was gleaned from Idi Amin himself. A retired Israeli colonel, who had served in Uganda and knew Amin well, established regular phone contact with the Ugandan president, ostensibly as a negotiator. Amin unwittingly provided valuable intelligence to Israeli planners and confirmed Ugandan complicity, an important fact for Israeli legitimacy³⁰. The entire process of merging

information from the Mossad and GSR Intelligence to operational planning took place within the normal administrative routine, again saving valuable time.³¹

Given the fact that it took over five months for the U.S. to launch its rescue attempt, one might be led believe that time was not a critical factor in planning and executing the operation. Time, however, did become a driving force due to NCA guidance, ad hoc planning, and inefficiencies in the intelligence architecture.

On November 12, General Vaught was assigned as operational commander and directed to begin planning. In less than two weeks Carter ordered all planning for the rescue mission to cease. His worry was that a leak from the planning function might jeopardize the fragile negotiations that Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was pursuing.³² This cost planners a significant amount of time and sent a mixed signal concerning the intentions of the White House. Equally detrimental to comprehensive planning was the perception that the timing of the mission was imminent. Turner described some problems that illustrate the lack of understanding at the White House of the impact of factor time.

The first was Zbig's constant pressure to get ready and stay ready. If the military had known they had several months in which to prepare, they could have done a number of things differently like screening more widely for helicopter pilots...or providing them time to organize and become a team. But no one could have predicted when the President would turn to a rescue option...The second was the Presidents delay in authorizing the CIA's flight into the desert to confirm and prepare the landing site at Desert One. Had he done so earlier, the military would have had more time to adjust its plans and rehearse; or the operation could have been conducted sooner, when the nights were longer.³³

In its zeal for security, the NCA and JCS consciously bypassed the standing contingency plan for crisis action in favor of an ad hoc arrangement that stressed compartmentation. Vaught had to consume valuable time setting up an organization that was responsible for blending the elements of intelligence, time, distance, people and equipment

into an exacting plan.³⁴ Adoption of the organizational and planning framework of the JCS CONPLAN could have saved time without sacrificing security and would have reduced the confusion and inefficiency of trying to integrate planning functions of subordinate units in a compartmented planning environment. Many of the details identified in the planning, such as the dust storms and the bus schedules at Desert One, were assumed to have been disseminated, but in reality were lost because of limitations on interaction during planning.

Initially the intelligence picture was void due to the absence of agents in Tehran after the revolution. The agents eventually inserted to secure transportation provided much valuable information but there were other detriments. The Holloway panel found that intelligence gathering suffered from interagency obstacles and owing to the ad hoc structure and compartmentation tended to provide information in piecemeal fashion. Their conclusion was that intel assets and resources could have operated faster and more efficiently if an interagency Intelligence Task Force (ITF) had been established in direct support of the JTF.³⁵ The key point to consider here is that the cumulative effect of these actions was a loss of time.

Factor Forces

In the end "the factor force plays the most critical part in the accomplishment of military objectives at any level."³⁶ Capabilities, effectiveness, and protection of forces, in relation to space and time, determine the adequacy and risk for the rescue operation.

The first issue for strategic and operational leaders to determine is the availability and preparedness of forces to conduct the operation. As previously noted, the IDF possessed highly trained and ready forces that only had to adjust to the particulars of the situation at Entebbe. Most of the ground force had participated in other raids and under the experienced

leadership of Shomron and Netaniahu constituted a cohesive and capable force. The C-130 crews were also ready for the particular demands of this mission. These required precise navigation at low altitude, special "muffled" landings on dark runways, and heavyweight minimum distance takeoffs. Peled was so confident of his pilots' capabilities for these tasks that he selected them from the normal IAF work roster.³⁷ A relatively junior pilot ended up leading the long-range historic mission to Entebbe, touching down within minutes of the planned time- a testimony to a ready force. This level of preparedness enabled the IDF to conduct a full-scale rehearsal, a requirement from General Gur, within the constraints of the deadline.³⁸

The U.S. force picture was more disparate. Beckwith's Delta Force was highly trained and specialized in raid and hostage rescue tactics. Though they did not have actual experience in rescues, many members had special operations experience in Vietnam and the team had conducted realistic exercises.³⁹ The stark limitation was the absence of supporting forces equipped and prepared for a scenario like Tehran. The required training and equipping, conducted under the handicap of a compartmented ad hoc organization and segregation, consumed valuable time and did not produce forces ready for the demands of the task. The much publicized failure of the helicopters, both crew and equipment, highlight the consequences of an under-equipped and under trained force. As to readiness to conduct the mission, the review group concluded that "By not utilizing an existing JTF organization, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had to start, literally, from the beginning to establish a JTF, find a commander, create an organization, provide a staff, develop a plan, select the units, and train the forces before attaining even the most rudimentary mission readiness".⁴⁰

In addition to training, the effectiveness and efficiency of a force depends on sound command and control, unity of effort, and concentration of force at the decisive point. In a hostage rescue situation the ability to provide mass depends on surprise and speed which in turn depend wholly on operational security.

Speed, secrecy, and surprise were the watchwords of the Israeli ground commander, Shomron, who understood the necessity of arriving at the Old Terminal building undetected.⁴¹ Everyone involved in the operation paid strict attention to security. Soldiers reported for duty in civilian clothes; orthodox Knesset members stayed within walking distance of where the cabinet met to avoid visibly violating the Sabbath, and some planners contributed without knowledge of the objective.

But the IDF balanced the need for security with a clear command and control structure and a thorough knowledge of the whole plan by the forces that were critically interdependent. The assault team leaders reported to Shomron, who set up his rapid command post on the ground at the airport. He reported to Peled and Adam in the airborne command post that was in instant contact with Gur, Peres, and Rabin. It was simple and effective. When Netanyahu was hit, his next in command took over securing the hostages; when a decision on a branch to the refueling plan was needed, the word to go to Nairobi for fuel was timely and direct. By each force component understanding the whole plan, unity of effort was maximized.

Effectiveness of U.S. forces was significantly, if not critically impaired by the out of balance focus on security. This emphasis spawned a faulty command and control structure that had a negative impact down to the tactical level. At the top there was not only a rank inversion between the operational commander and his deputy, but also unclear division of

responsibility. Gast was informally responsible for helicopter training and then supplanted by Pitman, who was the de facto leader but never officially designated.⁴² This in turn led to confusion in the helicopter force as to who was in charge, which eventually compounded the tactical disarray at Desert One. When six helos, minus Pitman's arrived out of order the consequences of inattention to command and control emerged. There was no identifiable or briefed command post for Colonel Kyle, the site commander, and radio communication was hampered by noise. General Vaught, the overall ground commander, was 1000 miles away in Egypt. Key personnel had no distinguishing insignia and personal recognition was difficult in the darkness and swirling sand from turning aircraft. Some of the helo pilots didn't recognize Beckwith or Kyle or understand who was in charge.⁴³

Holloway's group attributed many of the problems experienced at Desert One to the absence of a full-scale rehearsal. The decision to forgo a practice session that could have uncovered many of the "what ifs" was made in the interest of security. Some of the Air Force officers involved asserted that once they landed at the desert site, the operation contained complexities that were never anticipated during training.⁴⁴ Many analysts believed that excessive security precautions, while maintaining conditions for surprise, undermined the integration, coordination and training of various force components.⁴⁵ A more balanced approach, allowing for the benefits of unity of command and supporting unity of effort, may well have forged a more effective force while still maintaining security.

Security is important not only to effectiveness but also to force protection. If surprise is not attained it not only puts the hostages at risk but forces as well. A key part of the equation that can enhance security without subverting effectiveness is deception. Discussed earlier in the strategic context, deception also is valuable at the operational and tactical levels.

At the operational level, the Israelis implemented a plan to convince neighboring Arab governments that military preparations were underway for retaliatory strikes against terrorists in Lebanon and Syria.⁴⁶ This was believable because such actions had been taken in the past. At the tactical level, airborne electronic jamming of Entebbe tower's radar allowed a clandestine approach. The assault team used the combination of a black Mercedes and two Range Rovers, along with liberal black makeup, to disguise their approach to the hostages as a legitimate visit of a Ugandan official. This ruse bought precious time for the most critical phase.

The U.S. could have made better use of deception to enhance security at the operational level and reduce the compartmentation imposed on the various forces. The NCA was initially cowed by threats to kill hostages, but later realized that U.S. counter threats actually reduced the inflammatory rhetoric from Khomeini. The U.S. had the moral justification to raise military readiness and even stage deceptive forces, but the proposal to conduct a retaliatory strike was vetoed by Carter as unnecessary escalation⁴⁷. There was no serious attention given to integrating operational deception with the primary plan. At the tactical level, the agents in Tehran were successful in getting local transportation for the assault teams to approach the embassy undetected, but the plan failed at Desert One.

Conclusion

The contrasts between the Entebbe and Iranian operations highlight the influence of the political environment and the interdependent factors of space, force and time on planning and executing the uniquely demanding and risky mission of hostage rescue. The Israeli commitment to operational fundamentals was basic to their success whereas the U.S.

misapplication of those principles manifested the undoing at Desert One. In the aftermath of the failed attempt, Colonel Beckwith was asked what had been learned from the mission and what could be done to preclude a reoccurrence in the future. His answers illustrated the need for not only improved special operations capabilities but also the importance of basic operational principles. In his reply to the first question Beckwith said; "I learned that Murphy is alive and well. He's in every drawer, under every rock and on top of every hill. Sir, we purely had bad luck."⁴⁸ In responding to the second query, he stated that

In Iran we had an hoc affair. We went out, found bits and pieces, people and equipment, brought them together occasionally and then asked them to perform a highly complex mission. The parts all performed, but they didn't necessarily perform as a team. Nor did they have the same motivation.

My recommendation is to put together an organization which contains everything it will ever need, an organization which would include Delta, the Rangers, Navy SEALs, Air Force pilots, its own staff, its own support people, its own aircraft and helicopters. Make this organization a permanent military unit. Give it a place to call home. Allocate sufficient funds to run it. And give it sufficient time to recruit, assess, and train its people. Otherwise, we are not serious about combating terrorism.⁴⁹

Beckwith's clarion call concerning the capabilities of U.S. Special Operations Forces has been largely realized. Today, with the full stature and resources of a unified command, USSOCOM is a highly trained, equipped, and postured force. But it is not immune to the same misunderstanding and under appreciation of basic operational fundamentals that Beckwith attributed to "bad luck".

The incentive for operational commanders (and political leaders) to weigh the importance of these considerations should be high. The future may well hold similar situations where less powerful states or non-state actors look to asymmetric application of terror to confront U.S. military and economic dominance. There is no equation to guarantee victory but combining a continued focus on capabilities with a solid commitment to the proven principles of operational art will foster the best environment for success.

Endnotes

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